

FIRST AUSTRALIAN RECORD OF ORIENTAL SCOPS OWL (*OTUS SUNIA*) WITH NOTES ON ITS DISTRIBUTION AND MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

On 12 May 2013 a small live but exhausted owl was found aboard the vessel *Deepwater Frontier* operating between the mainland of Western Australia and Barrow Island at 20° 54' S, 115° 37' E. It was photographed by Adrian Gani aboard the vessel and a head photo sent to Chevron Australia workers who forwarded a copy to the Western Australian Museum for identification. The bird died shortly after, was then frozen and sent to Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for quarantine, then to Perth for gamma irradiation on 30 May and finally to the Western Australian Museum. The specimen was then prepared into a study skin (registered number A38679) and its identification confirmed as an Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia*.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIMEN

Details of the bird are as follows. Adult female; total length 182 mm; weight 46 g (with no body or subcutaneous fat); entire

culmen 22 mm; exposed culmen 17 mm; bill width 9.8 mm; wing 149 mm; tail 66 mm; tarsus 27 mm; middle toe and claw 25 mm. Iris bright yellow; bill upper mandible dark greyish brown tipped blackish, lower mandible greyish white; feet pinkish grey; claws dull pinkish white at base tipped blackish brown. See Figure 1.

Upperparts mostly greyish brown the feathers with a narrow dark brown or blackish shaft streak (most prominent on forehead and back) and with fine bars and vermiculations. Some feathers of ear tufts, crown and mantle with cinnamon buff or whitish sub-terminal band or spot edged black giving a mottled appearance. Ear tufts (up to 27 mm long) and some ear coverts ending in small hair like bristles. Lower back, rump and uppertail coverts greyish brown with fine dark vermiculations. Scapulars mostly cinnamon buff or whitish buff tipped black forming a prominent shoulder patch. Wing coverts mostly brownish grey like the back with a fine dark shaft line and fine or faint vermiculations. Outer primaries greyish brown marked with



Figure 1. *Otus sunia* photographed in life by A. Gani.

cinnamon brown and dull white bars edged with dark brown and more or less vermiculated and the pale bars on the outer web forming a somewhat chequered appearance. Secondaries and tertiaries mostly greyish brown finely vermiculated with dark brown and barred or notched with whitish on inner webs. Upper tail coverts like the back. Tail greyish brown with fine grey speckling and vermiculations and feathers with six narrow dull cinnamon or whitish buff bars edged blackish brown.

Underparts mostly greyish brown, more heavily streaked and vermiculated than upperparts. Lore feathers white, the shafts black and ending in long hair like bristles. Feathers around the eye mostly whitish to

cinnamon grading to grey on cheeks. Behind the ear coverts a short ruff of cinnamon feathers tipped with black and this ruff extending to edge of throat. Chin feathers (most missing) dull greyish white. The breast mostly cinnamon buff and white the feathers with broad blackish shaft streaks and crossed with a few wavy brown vermiculations. Centre of belly inclining to white forming a large whitish to buff patch on midline. Sides of breast and flanks mostly white to cinnamon buff and feathers with black shaft streak and extensive fine vermiculations. Undertail coverts dull buffy white. Lesser underwing coverts mostly cinnamon buff, tipped with greyish brown and greater coverts buff. Rest of underwing



Figure 2. Photograph of Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* A 38679 showing details of (a) dorsal and (b) ventral surfaces.

i.e. flight feathers mostly greyish brown barred or deeply notched with white that fades to cinnamon buff towards tips of feathers. Under tail as upper

surface but paler. Tarsus feathers cinnamon buff slightly streaked with brown and feathered to base of toes. See Figure 2.

DISTRIBUTION, GEOGRAPHIC
VARIATION, STATUS AND
MIGRATION

This species ranges from northern Pakistan, India and Nepal east to Bangladesh and Assam, Sri Lanka, eastern Asia from Japan, eastern Siberia, Manchuria, Taiwan and eastern China to the Malay Peninsula. It is also resident and probably a visitor in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and vagrant to Hong Kong and the Aleutian Islands. The most southern populations are resident, but birds from northern regions from eastern Siberia and Japan migrate south to winter in India, south China and South East Asia to the Malay Peninsula. It is a vagrant to Hong Kong and the Aleutian Islands (Konig *et al.* 1999). See Figure 3.

Currently eight subspecies are recognised, however the taxonomy is complex and some taxa may be specifically distinct from *O. sunia* and furthermore this species has long been considered as conspecific with Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*. The various subspecies of *sunia* can be distinguished by size, colour, wing shape and the extent of feathering on the tarsus. Of the eight subspecies only three namely *Otus s. sunia*, *O. s. stictonotus*, *O. s. japonicus* match our specimen in coloration and size especially wing and tail length.

The nominate subspecies *O. sunia sunia* ranges from Pakistan and Nepal east to Bhutan, Bangladesh and Assam.

Wing ranges from 135–154 mm and tail 60–70 mm.

Otus sunia stictonotus occurs in Manchuria, Amur and Ussuriland south to northern China and Korea. Wing ranges from 138–158 mm and tail 68–72 mm.

Otus sunia japonicus occurs in Japan. Wing ranges from 143–153 mm and tail 68–72 mm.

All of these populations migrate south to winter in India, south-east China, Korea, Taiwan and western Indonesia (Sumatra). North-east Asian *stictonotus* for example have been identified among migrants south to Trang on the western side of the Malay Peninsula. The local breeding population on the Malay Peninsula *O. s. malayanus* is slightly smaller, has less feathering on tarsus and is sedentary. In Japan a rufous morph of *japonicus* is apparently very frequent and the grey morph is similar to *stictonotus*. The latter is the largest and palest subspecies and based on size (especially tail length) and coloration our specimen matches best with the nominate form *O. s. sunia*. Some northern populations of this subspecies undergo long-distance migration south to the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and occasionally Singapore (although apparently no recent records from Singapore). Passage migrants have been recorded on the Malay Peninsula (e.g. collision at One Fathom Bank lighthouse) and main movements extreme dates 28 October and 27 March based on interceptions at lights

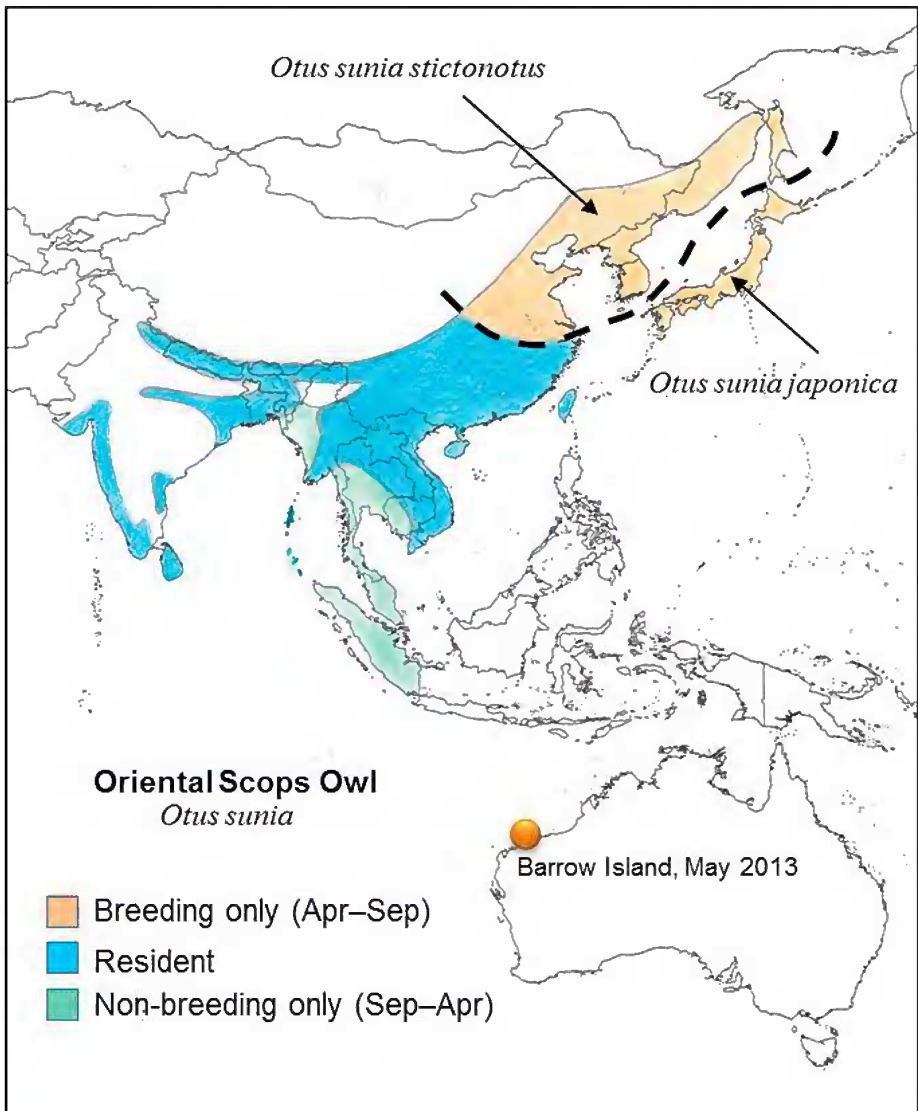


Figure 3. Map showing the distribution of *Otus sunia* populations.

on Fraser's Hill and at Melaka Straits lighthouses, with autumn passage continuing to mid-December.

Weights of birds range from 75–95 g and it is of interest that the Western Australian bird weighed

only 46 g, had a very bony keel and no subcutaneous or body fat. At virtually half the weight of migrant birds it was very emaciated and would have had trouble trying to forage in the Pilbara.

HABITAT, FOOD AND CALL

This species favours open woodlands and savannas with scattered trees and open riverside forest. Also parks and large gardens. It forages mainly near forest edges and in open country. Its food is mainly insects, spiders and small vertebrates taken from the ground or sometimes from vegetation.

Its song consists of soft, monotonous, three noted phrases "bo-po-so" or "buk-kyok-koo" and occasionally calls during spring migration.

DISCUSSION

Whereas such northern hemisphere breeding species as the 'shorebirds' migrate in their millions to their major non-breeding areas in Australia, others such as the Barn Swallows and Yellow Wagtails appear only in small numbers but do so annually.

The status of such birds as the present species is subject to many interpretations, did it arrive ship-assisted or unassisted, taking up residence on the supply vessel after transferring to it from an inter-continental one (which could well have originated from an area /port within the normal range of the species. The fact that the bird was significantly underweight (with no subcutaneous or body fat etc.) suggested that it had performed a long-distance flight.

The Blue and White Flycatcher recorded in this general area at Cossack (see Johnstone and Darnell 1996) was also considered as a likely ship-assisted bird, but the species has now been recorded as a vagrant elsewhere in Western Australia and these records almost certainly are not ship-assisted.

That there are odd northern hemisphere / Asian individuals which occur far beyond their normal ranges can be illustrated by the fact that an Asian Stubtail was recorded on Ashmore Reef some 2500 km south of its normal southernmost 'wintering' area, south Thailand, Indo China, this without a suggestion or hint of ship assistance. The latter was also an October record so there is no suggestion of a wrong-way migration.

Specimens such as this *Otus sunia* are not only valuable additions to our research collections but provide knowledge on trans-equatorial migrations and in particular the avian traffic between Asia and Australia.

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